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SIDE-LIGHTS ON THE TELEGRAPHERS' STRIKE

1. *The background of the strike.*—The first serious trouble between the telegraph companies and their employees occurred in 1883 when a demand was made for higher wages and better conditions of employment. The companies refused to grant any concessions, and a general strike was declared. This strike lasted only about ten days and the operators were decisively beaten. The causes for their defeat are clearly apparent. The union was relatively weak, and not more than 50 per cent. of the telegraphers ever quit work. Moreover, the railway telegraphers were not yet organized, and many of them stood ready to take the strikers' places. Following this strike the companies made a general reduction in wages, and, according to the union officials, placed the strike-leaders upon a black-list. From 1883 to 1902 several attempts were made to reorganize the operators. Organizations were launched in 1892 and 1894, both of which failed. In 1897 the Brotherhood of Commercial Telegraphers was organized, and in 1902 the International Union of Commercial Telegraphers. These unions amalgamated in 1903 to form the present Commercial Telegraphers Union of America. According to the union officials, the organization has been strongly opposed by the companies, especially by the Western Union. Therefore the operators have been slow to join, for fear that they would lose their positions. When the strike began last August it is probable that not more than one-third of the eighteen or twenty thousand commercial telegraphers of the country were in the union. Nevertheless it is claimed by the union leaders that over 90 per cent. of all the operators, in and out of the union, left their keys.

2. *The inception of the strike.*—The recent strike began at Los Angeles on August 8. Its immediate cause was the discharge of a Los Angeles operator employed by the Western Union Telegraph Company, upon the complaint of a woman operator in San Francisco. This woman, who had been taken into the San Francisco office during a strike a few weeks earlier, claimed that she had been insulted by the operator sending messages from Los Angeles. The Los Angeles operator was discharged. His fellow-workers demanded his reinstatement, and when this was refused, left their keys. The next day the strike spread to Chicago, and within forty-eight hours to all parts of the country. The telegraphers of the Postal Telegraph Company, the Associated Press, and of several

minor concerns, mostly "broker offices," quit with those employed by the Western Union. It should be noted that the strike was made general in spite of the protests of the national officers of the union. When the operators at Los Angeles quit work, President Small ordered the operators in all other cities to stay at their keys until they should receive further notice. His orders were absolutely disregarded. The local organizations took matters into their own hands, and the national officials were forced to "legalize" the strike in order to maintain their position at the head of the organization.

3. *Demands of the workers.*—It was not until the strikers had been out some time that they made a clear, definite statement of what they wanted. This delay in making known their demands was not in accordance with the practices of most trade-unions. The demands of the operators, as finally formulated, were:

1. A 15 per cent. increase in wages.
2. An eight-hour day.
3. Equal pay for women for equal work.
4. Free typewriters.

The third and fourth items may require a little explanation. A considerable proportion of the operators are women. It was claimed by the strikers that though the women frequently send just as many messages per day as do the men, they are seldom, if ever, given equal pay. The typewriter is used by practically all first-class operators in taking down messages, and must be furnished by the employee. Hence the demand for free typewriters.

The officials of the Postal Telegraph Company state that they have been paying a reasonable wage, the majority of their operators receiving from \$72 to \$88 per month, with extra pay for overtime. They declare that the women are paid as much as men when they do the same amount of work. And they claim that the hours of labor are not excessive, the shifts varying from seven and one-half hours to nine, according to the time of day. The officials of the Western Union Company refuse to make any statement upon these points.

4. *The character of the struggle.*—After a twelve weeks' battle the telegraphers are returning to their keys defeated at every point excepting in the "broker offices." Nevertheless, the fight has been stubbornly, though peaceably, contested. When the telegraphers quit work in August they expected to gain a sweeping victory in the course of a week or ten days. They were not pre-

pared for a long and grueling contest. Yet, though week after week passed by without any signs of a settlement, the strikers kept their ranks practically intact. The remarkable persistence and determination of the rank and file was forcibly demonstrated on October 13, when President Small, without consulting the local officers of the union, advised his followers to give up the struggle and to go back to work. A shout of disapproval and protest arose from coast to coast. Small was denounced as an incompetent, if not a traitor, and was deposed from office. The local unions voted almost unanimously to continue the fight.

There are several reasons for this determined attitude of the strikers. In the first place, many of them still expected to win. They felt that the companies could not fill their places, and that, if they could only hold out long enough, victory was certain. There were others who saw little hope of victory, but who were too proud to admit defeat. As one of the leaders expressed the thought, "We are not going to return to those offices until we can walk in the front door." This spirit plays a much greater rôle in a semi-middle class organization of intelligent, individualistic workers like the telegraphers than it would in many other unions. Again, there were some who would have been willing to return to work as individuals, but who refused to "scab." Hence they resolved to stay out with the majority until the strike was ended. Another point which should not be overlooked in this connection is the fact that probably 30 per cent. of the operators are women. These women have been among the most steadfast strikers, and the men were ashamed to go back while the women stood firm. And finally, the strikers have been encouraged and supported by other trade-unionists.

The contest has been, in a measure, a struggle between organized labor and organized capital. The telegraphers had no funds in their own treasury, even at the outset. Hence they were forced to appeal to their fellow-unionists for support. The response, to be sure, was not over-generous. But, nevertheless, many unions made liberal contributions. The Order of Railway Telegraphers, for example, donated over \$30,000. The companies, on the other hand, are controlled by unyielding officials, backed by the most powerful capitalistic interests in the country. President Clowry of the Western Union has always refused to have any dealings with the union, and has declared that he will run the business without any dictation from the employees. Among the directors of the West-

ern Union are such financiers as J. P. Morgan, J. J. Astor, George Gould, E. H. Harriman, and James Stillman. Clarence H. Mackay seems to be the main stockholder in the Postal Company. Barring public intervention, such a group of capitalists can, and probably will, if necessary, fight the telegraphers indefinitely.

5. *Probable results of the fight.*—As stated above, the strikers seem now to have been completely defeated. Nevertheless, this struggle will have many far-reaching consequences. In the first place, some 15,000 rather naïve trade-unionists have been converted into a radical semi-socialistic group of workers. In Chicago, for example, the strikers have been addressed frequently by socialist speakers, and they have been reading the *Daily Socialist*, which championed their cause. As a result the Chicago telegraphers are pretty well saturated with socialistic doctrines. The socialists in other parts of the country likewise have been making the most of their opportunity to convert the telegraphers to socialism.

Another important result has been the further introduction of the Rowland and Barclay machines by the companies. In the Chicago office of the Postal Company, for example, no machines were in use before the strike. Now two machines are employed on the New York and St. Louis wires, and more are likely to be introduced in the near future. Messages may be sent upon these machines by young women who know practically nothing of telegraphy, and at the receiving end the message comes out automatically recorded and printed. Superintendent Capen of the Chicago office states that the Postal Company is offering every encouragement to experts now at work upon the Rowland machine in order that it may be adapted to economical use in the smaller offices. In a similar way the Western Union Company is making every effort to perfect the Barclay machine.

A probable third consequence of the strike will be the amalgamation of the commercial telegraphers with the Order of Railway Telegraphers. The latter organization is much the stronger body (47,000 members), and the commercial telegraphers feel that they would do well to join with it.

Finally, if the telegraph companies re-employ and retain in their service the operators who are now on strike, without making any concessions, it is safe to predict another general strike within five years. It seems needless to point out the effect of such strikes on the demand for government ownership.

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